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ABSTRACT

The shift in paradigm from product to process should force a new look at the ways in which the teacher reads student writing. From the perspective of reader-response criticism, it should be no surprise that teachers would differ in their response to, and therefore assessment of, student writing. Examining two graded student essays, one from a sixth grade student and one from a college student, reveals that teachers do not read; they edit from the perspective that the text is autonomous and free standing, the real world manifestation of an independent ideal form. The contextless, unnatural writing that is promoted in the academic world may be the source of bad writing outside of it. Reader-response criticism may help solve this problem. Writing, like living, is both free and constrained. At present, teachers tend to cancel or ignore their "real" response to a piece of writing and replace it with a "professional" response. The connections between critical practice and the ways teachers read should be examined. Then, perhaps, teachers can be freed from the requirement of "normalized" responses. Student writers write for someone--the teacher--so teachers should allow themselves to become readers, valuing subjectivity and trusting and expressing their first and best response to the student's text. (JL)

Reading Student Writing
Talk delivered to NCTE
November 21, 1982
Charles Moran

In the past few years we have seen a major "paradigm shift," as Thomas Kuhn would call it, in the field of English Composition. This shift, comparable in scope and power to the shift that has taken place in geology, where "plate tectonics" is suddenly in the driver's seat, has changed, practically overnight, our product-orientation to a process orientation. Instead of concentrating upon the product of the creative process, we look at the creative process itself and, as teachers or coaches, attempt to help the student writer along in the execution of the activity of writing.

A similar paradigm shift has taken place in our understanding of the reading process. Reading, we now agree in most quarters, is itself an active process, one in which the reader brings the creative self to bear upon a text. The reader composes, makes meaning-- composing the text in the way a sculptor composes a piece of marble. The reader is not simply passive, recording and storing images of print, but is an active participant in a process that involves both print and mind and produces meaning.

This process orientation in our work with writing and with reading has made it more and more difficult to think of the text as autonomous-- to believe in what James Kinneavy has called "the mythical autonomy of the text." If the text evolves during one process (writing) and participates in another process (reading) the text begins to lose clarity of outline, to become part of something

much larger than itself. It begins, in a word, to become part of a context that includes at least the writer and the reader and perhaps, as John Freund has suggested, even the kind of light in which the text is produced and, of course, read.

A similar paradigm shift is occurring in the field of literary criticism. New Criticism, in which the text is assumed to be autonomous, to have objective reality, has been challenged by reader-response criticism. Reader-response criticism pays attention to the reader. The amount of attention that is to be paid is in dispute, but there is wide agreement that some attention must be paid to the reader's response to literature, as well as to the literature itself. No longer can we look at the "poem as poem." We begin to see the poem as the beginnings of a process that takes place within the reader, a process in which the reader and poem are collaborators.

To illustrate the dimension of the change, let me remind us of a book that was absolutely seminal in my own graduate study: I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism. You remember Richards' situation: he had given a poem to his graduate students, and they all read it differently. Richards was, as you remember, unhappy about this difference. These graduate students were reading badly, he believed--they were reacting to the text with "stock responses," not seeing the text as text but reacting to it in ways that missed the point. They were, in various ways, misreading the text. Richards assumed that reality was a property of the text, and that the text told us how it should be read. There was, in short, a

single, text-determined "correct" reading.

Richards' Practical Criticism is an example, and a powerful example, of the New Critical paradigm. Reality is understood to be a property of the text. E. D. Hirsh, Charles Olson, Walter Kintsch, and anyone who believes that there can be a text-based criterion for "readibility"--such as propositional density, T-unit length, or syllable-counts, assumes that the text is the primary locus of reality. The reader-response critics, in sharp contrast, assume that the reader is the primary locus of reality. Here is Louise Rosenblatt on the subject. I quote from her book, The Reader, The Text, The Poem(1978).

> "The text is merely an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page as verbal symbols."

And here is Wolfgang Iser:

> "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader--though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text."

This shift in emphasis from product to process, and the resultant de-sanctification of the text, makes the world of English Composition suddenly seem strange and interesting; it is as if we had put on infra-red or X-ray spectacles. To begin with, it becomes clear to us that in our work with student writing we tend to assume that the text is autonomous. There are good papers and bad papers, A papers and D papers. We score student writing holistically after we have "normalized" --which is to say profoundly altered-- our responses to student writing. If a student gets an A from one

teacher and an F from another on the same paper, this is, from the student's perspective, "unfair." From the perspective of an administrator, uneven grading is a sign of a program in disrepair, a staff of borderline competence. Evaluating student writing is a process in which it is generally assumed that the text is autonomous, the teacher a reading machine that is criterion-referenced, normalized, efficient. Textbooks in our courses assume, with Hirsch and Kintsch, that "good writing" is a quantity that inheres in the text and can be described. Good writing, we read, is "concise"— not "concise enough to suit the reader's purposes," but simply "concise." And conciseness is a property of a text.

The shift in paradigm from product to process should force us to look again at the ways in which the teacher reads student writing. If meaning is really made by readers, if the reader's response to a text is partly the reader's, as well as the words', doing, then we ought to look at the ways in which teachers as readers respond to student writing. From the perspective of reader-response criticism, we should expect that teachers would differ in their response to, and therefore their assessment of, student writing. The fact that one teacher says "I like this" and another says "I don't like this" should be entirely acceptable— and interesting.

Reader-response criticism forces us to look at the composition teacher as a reader and to ask this question: "When the teacher reads student writing, what is the teacher doing? What is the

nature of the activity? What are the outlines of the process?" If we look at the process of responding to student writing from the pinnacle (or pit, as you like) of the new paradigm, what do we see? I have brought with me today two pieces of student writing, each commented on by the teacher/reader. I would like to look at these pieces and attempt to reconstruct the reader's response to the writing from the reader's markings on the paper. This is a risky and imprecise way of getting at the process of reader-response, but it is the best tool we have, at present.

The first is an essay by my daughter Amy. Her teacher, a good and decent person, a friend of our family, asked her sixth grade students to write report on a short essay. Here is Amy's report.

Bushmen

The story I read about the Bushmen was on pages 9, 10, and 11. It was about a man named Short Kwi. Short Kwi was a very famous person and a very good hunter. He very rarely lost an animal that he had tracked and shot with his poision arrows. He knew the habits of animals and when they were dangerous. Once, when he and some other men were tracking a wildebeest that they had shot, they found it surrounded by a pride of lions. The men spoke to the lions and threw clods of dirt on them, until finally they left. But the men still could not have the wildebeest, because it held them off with its horns. Short Kwi grabbed a spear and hurled it at the beast,

but did not kill it, though the spear lodged in its neck. They couldn't get the spear back, because the beast continued protecting itelf from the hunters. Finally, Short Kwi leaped upon its back, grabbed the spear, and with some incredible manoevering managed to get out of the way before the wildebeest gored him. He then hurled the spear again and killed the creature. Short Kwi had an adoring wife, and because of all the meat he got, he and her (sorry) could rest. He was (and still is) the best hunter on the Kalihari.

From this story you could tell many things about the Bushmen. You could tell that they were crafty and good hunters. You could tell that they were intelligent and in good shape. You could tell that they were gutsy and modest. You could tell that they used poisioned arrows and spears. You can tell that they can preserve meat and share. You can tell that they live in the desert and in grass huts. They live well and happily.---------

Now I like this essay-- partly because it is by my daughter, but also because it is fresh, direct, rhetorically sophisticated, and, until the final obligatory listing of all the things that "you can tell," it is suffused with a delight in the subject and in the act of writing. The teacher clearly liked the essay too; that liking is reflected in the grade of B+. But let us look together at the comments the teacher has made. The first, upper left: "You need an introductory paragraph." Does the essay need an introductory paragraph? Amy asked me if it did, and I said "of course," without thinking. And then I tried to write an introductory paragraph.

Here's the best I could do:

"The essay "Bushmen" is an account of the life of a tribe that lives on the Kalihari. At the center of the essay is Short Kwi, a fine hunter and good husband."

Now we have an introductory paragraph, but we'll have to rewrite Amy's essay entirely if we want to continue on. We can't simply add an introductory paragraph. And when we try to add the paragraph, the essay becomes not Amy's essay but ours. We have, to use Nancy Sommers' word, "appropriated" Amy's essay and made it ours.

Why did Amy's teacher ask for the impossible? Because, I believe, she was cancelling her own response to the essay and looking at the essay as if it were autonomous, free-standing, free of context-- not discourse, but writing. Amy's teacher gives her essay what Kenneth Dowst has called a "formalist" reading. There is an ideal form; this form is placed like a template over the existing essay, and the teacher notes where the essay does not fit.

I want to look at the final comment next. "Good points in conclusion. Clear evidence for your statements." Now I have looked hard at Amy's essay and can, for the life of me, find nothing that I could call a "point." The essay does not make points; it does not back up points with evidence. It is not an argument, but a report. Again I remind you-- this is a good teacher, expensively educated, warm, decent, and good. What is going on? Again, the teacher has cancelled her response to the writing and has adopted external, and

inevitably inappropriate, standards. A good essay will have an introductory paragraph, a concluding paragraph, will make points, and will back up those points with evidence. This good essay will, of course, be autonomous, free-standing-- written by just anyone, to just anyone, and for no clear purpose.

I want to look at the remaining marginal comment, "this sentence is out of place." Let us look together at the sentence that is so marked. "Short Kwi had an adoring wife, and because of all the meat he got, he and her (sorry) could rest." Now what is "out of place" about this? As I read the essay, I don't find it out of place at all. Here's what I think Amy is up to. She has re-told the story, in a rather entertaining way. The assignment was a one-page report; she is closing in on the end of the page--so she has to stop the story somehow. She does this with what seems to me a good move-- a quick dismount, really-- getting off the story's back, finishing it off with a quick summary, and getting on to the final paragraph's list of "things you can tell." In addition, Amy is talking directly to her teacher--which she has been doing throughout the paper, really, but the quick aside here, "(sorry)," seems to have exceeded this teacher's tolerance for the personal voice.

Here's what I think Amy was up to. Amy is writing along; this is the final draft and, of course, the only draft. Amy comes to a choice of pronouns: "he and she" or "he and her." She makes the wrong choice. She thinks she may have made the wrong choice. She thinks-- "damn. I may have just made the wrong choice. Perhaps it

should be "he and she." If I change it, the paper will be messy. And I might just be right--these pronouns are a bother. So I'll cover myself by saying "sorry." That will tell the teacher that I know I'm wrong, so that if I am, the teacher won't notice, really. So I wink at the teacher. "You and I, teacher, we know that "he and her" is wrong, but we know too that if I correct this I will have to recopy the entire essay, and you, teacher, are a good and sensible person and you wouldn't make me do that--so I carry on, with a wink at you, teacher. We are, you and I, in this together." The teacher, however, is having none of this. As the teacher reads the essay, she is comparing Amy's work with a model-- the school essay. Amy's writing is no longer discourse, but simply writing-- autonomous, like the Duke's last Duchess, lifeless, on the wall. "This sentence is out of place." And that's all there is to say about that.

I want to look at another essay, also duplicated for you. This is a college-level essay; I don't want to suggest by my selection of texts that secondary school teachers read differently from college teachers. They don't.

The Chain Reaction

When I was ten my mother died. Her death triggered a domino reaction in my family.

Due primarily to my mother's death, my father began to drink heavily. He had always enjoyed drinking, but never to that extent,

sometimes he would get so drunk he would pass out for hours. Eventually he became a full-fledged alcoholic. This made me lose respect for him; he never fit the ideal of what I thought a father should be. Maybe I expected too much; nevertheless, it put a heavy strain on our relationship.

My mother's death also changed the relationship I had with my sister. My sister assumed the mother role, this I found extremely difficult to deal with., It seemed like one day my sister and I went from a laughing and playful relationship to a very serious, tension-filled one. All of a sudden, my sister was an authority figure. I missed the friendship we once shared and, not knowing who else to blame, I turned my back on her.

The sudden transition in my home led me straight into the arms of my friends. My home life became so chaotic, nobody knew their places anymore. Friends became my new family. I began to be home less and less, seeking refuge in friends. I was happy to be anyplace but home it was too confusing to deal with.

Being ten when my mother died, I never thought it had much of an impact on me, but looking back, I realize it played a significant role in my development.

I want to look at the concluding comment first: "the ideas are full and explained, but the paper's marred by too many errors --> hard for your reader to make sense of -- evidences scanty

(control?)."

Note first the similarity between the concluding comment here and the comment Amy's teacher made. Both essays are being judged, apparently, by the criterion "fulness of idea" and "explanation of idea"-- if you can read "explanation" as "proof," which I think you can here.

But second, and you have surely noted this already, the reader has gone mad. If you will look with me at the first remark, written over the first sentence: "weak-- needs development." Is this a weak opening sentence? Not at all. "When I was ten my mother died. Her death triggered a domino reaction in my family." That first sentence stands right up there with great first sentences I have known. It is direct, engaging, makes me want to read on. I am in the grip of a story-teller who tells a story that will have meaning for me. And the next sentence: should we really move "heavily" from its present location? If we follow this reader's instructions, the sentence will read thus: "Due primarily to my mother's death, my father began heavily to drink." What is going on?

I am not certain what is going on. The evidence before us sustains at least these two hypoetheses. The first is that for this teacher, reading is a hunt for error. The text is autonomous--it is from no one, to no one, and has no purpose relative to anything outside of itself. It is a text that needs to be edited, because it will be published! It must be cleaned up, proof-read, and made just so for the typesetter who will never come. This teacher has become a particular kind of reader-- a copy-reader. The copy-reader

responds to errors in the text, to the text's surface. The standard is Edited American English, or if you are copyreading for Oxford University Press, the stylesheet for that press. It is not the copyreader's business to react to the material, the meaning of the text. I find myself that copyreading is best done by reading backwards; that way, the meaning of the text never emerges to get in the way of my search for the typographical error.

The problem with this kind of reading in an academic context is, of course, that the work is not going to be published. Insofar as we adopt the copyreader's stance when we read student writing, we are condemned to a life of copyreading texts that will never see print. That's a pretty strange life to choose to live.

The second hypothesis complements the first. It runs thus: the reader, profoundly shocked by the content, has turned away from content and found refuge in correctness. The text has too much meaning for this reader, is too painful to deal with. So the reader stops reading and begins proof-reading.

I'm not at all sure about this second hypothesis. I do not know the teacher; all I have is the paper that you have before you. Whatever the case, it is the case that the teacher has made no overt response to the content of the essay.

Now where does all this lead us? The question before us is still this: "When we read student writing, what kind of reader do we become?" The kind of reader we become has a great deal to do with the context of the reading. If we are opening our child's Christmas bicycle, taking it out of its Sears box and discovering

"Directions for Assembling Bicycle," we are in a no-nonsense mood, reading for help. If we are, on the other hand, alone of a Saturday afternoon in our apartment, and we pick up a novel, we are in a rather different mood, reading for escape, transport, delight, instruction. Imagine our anger if we find, as the first words of the novel, "Parts list, Sears Cat. No. 4132568967." My point: we are, can be, must be, different readers at different times. What kind of reader are we when we read student writing?

When we look at the teacher reading student writing, we see a rather remarkable sight. We see the reader paid to read. That in itself is remarkable. Small wonder that we fall back upon the most obvious professional model available to us: the editor. When we look at the teacher/reader's situation, we also see a reader who reads material well beyond the point of incomprehension or confusion. In a free-market situation, if you don't like a piece of writing, you put it down and pick up another. As teachers, however, we feel obliged to read to the end, however little we may understand what's going on. We are no longer readers, at this point, really. We have become something else--unhappy, burdened, unpleasant. It is no wonder our students are confused. Who are we, exactly? Who is out there? You can see Amy trying, with her "sorry," to establish contact-- and it doesn't work. You can see the author of "The Chain Reaction" trying, and that doesn't work either.

I can't solve this problem, but I can describe its effects. I teach writing outside the University, as a writing coach. I find

this teaching rewarding, remunerative, and terribly easy. I find my clients in business generally writing quite well. When they are not writing well, they are producing writing that is from no one, to no one, and for no purpose. They are creating autonomous texts, devoid of context. The turgid memorandum is turgid because the memorandum has ceased to be discourse and has become pure "writing," produced by the yard, with difficulty. The pamphlet on septic tanks is simply a pamphlet on septic tanks, filled with information. It is designed for no particular reader, in no particular situation. It does not have a clear purpose relative to a clearly-imagined audience. It is simply words on paper-- no imagined reader, no imagined self, no imagined purpose-- in short, writing that is without context.

I can't help believing that the poor writing I meet outside the academic world is the result of the way in which writing is read within the academic world. Reader-response criticism may give us some help. From this new perspective, when we read student writing, we should accept our humanity, listen to our "hearts," if you will. We should also do whatever we can to create more-or-less credible writer/reader relationships wherever we can. This would suggest that using peers as reader is a good idea. Peers are not a "real" audience either; assigned classroom writing is ineluctably artificial.

Let me conclude with a parable that is also a true story. Amy Moran and I are driving up Pelham hill toward home. I have picked Amy up after school, where she has been making up a Math test. I

begin to inquire about the mathematics; Amy, not wanting to talk about this, and being, as we all are, rhetorically sophisticated, tries to distract me from this subject. She says, therefore, "Dad--do you know what the hardest thing about writing is?" I cave in; she has won this round. I do, desperately, want to know what the hardest thing about writing is. I abandon the original topic, and say, "No, Amy. What is the hardest thing about writing?" She responds: "It is finding out what the teacher wants." I say "Oh?" She continues. "Mrs. Skipton likes things sappy; Mrs. ---- does not." I say, "What do you mean, sappy?" She replies: "Oh, you know. Red clouds around the sunset--that sort of thing. What should I do?"

And there it is. I tell her, as you would, that she shouldn't put in red clouds when there are not, or should not be, red clouds. She tells me that I don't know anything. "That's the way you get C's, Dad." So I retreat from that absolute stand-- be true to yourself, to your own vision-- because that is a romantic posture, one that is not really helpful or true. Amy is right: her words will be read by a reader, and this reader must be taken into account. So I tell Amy this. She has read the Oedipus; I am one up on her-- I have read Levi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus. I tell her that Levi-Strauss explains the universality of the Oedipus story thus: the story contains a universal human situation. Human beings think of themselves simultaneously in two ways: as autonomous beings, self-created--for the mind does not directly know otherwise-- and as beings imbedded in history. We think of

ourselves as free, and as constrained. So it is, I tell Amy, with the writer. The writer is a human being, and so must consider the human condition. The writer is free, autonomous, and must be so. The writer is also constrained by the context into which the writing will fall. In school-writing, that context is a teacher who is a reader, responding to the text. Different teachers will respond in different ways. That is the hardest thing about writing-- she is right. And it is also the hardest thing about life.

To leave Amy now, for she has achieved her objective long ago--I have forgotten about her Math test-- and return to the relationship between reader response criticism and the teaching of writing. When we look at the reading of student writing from this new perspective, it seems that reading student writing is an unnatural act, finally. We think we are paid to read on past the point of incomprehension. We think of ourselves as editors, doomed to edit for publication thousands of pieces of writing that will never achieve publication. I believe that we have an important research area here-- looking at the ways in which teachers respond to student writing as an indicator of the kinds of readers they become when they read student writing. One of the immediate findings will be that teachers read differently. Different teachers (read readers) read differently because they bring different worlds to the text. And that's not a bad thing. What we may begin to find, and I think that the essays I have presented today suggest this conclusion, is that teachers tend to cancel or ignore their "real"

response to a piece of writing and replace it with a "professional" response. They do this not because they are bad people, which they are not, but because this kind of reading comes with the territory. Given lecture-style classrooms and given textbooks and handbooks, it is difficult to bring a fresh reading to a piece of student writing. And I suggest that there are connections to be made between critical practice, specifically new criticism, and the ways in which we tend to read for ideal form and to assume that there is, somewhere, an Ur-text that this piece of student writing is trying to become. And, of course, there is our history as a colonial people, which may account for our fear of error in language manners, and our steady reading of George Orwell and his derivative, William Zinsser, who assume that it is our duty to clean up the language for political and moral reasons.

From a reader-response perspective, holistic scoring looks like a demonic activity. Why should we "normalize" our responses? Why should we achieve a reliability in excess of 90%? We are not machines; readers are not machines. Why should we train writers to write as if they were writing to no one at all? In a school context, student writers are writing most often to their teachers. Even with extensive peer-criticism, the teacher is still there, lurking behind the peer. Perhaps, given the ascendancy of the subjective paradigm, teachers will begin to value their subjectivity-- will allow themselves to become readers-- to discover, trust, and express their first and best response to the student's text. In any case, we need to look at the kinds of

readings we do bring to student texts because, whatever the announced curriculum, we teach the way we read.